Japanese Hell Ships of World War II

A Reference Catalogue of Vessels, Voyages, and Prisoner Casualties

Overview

During World War II, the Empire of Japan requisitioned merchant vessels to transport Allied prisoners of war and forced labourers to locations throughout the Pacific. Survivors called these ships "hell ships" — the holds were floating dungeons where prisoners were denied adequate food, water, ventilation, and sanitation. According to historian Gregory F. Michno (*Death on the Hellships*, Naval Institute Press, 2001), 134 Japanese hell ships conducted more than 156 voyages carrying an estimated 126,000 Allied POWs. Approximately 1,540 Allied POW deaths resulted from conditions and violence aboard the ships, while more than 19,000 deaths resulted from Allied air and submarine attacks on the unmarked vessels. The ships carried no markings to indicate the presence of POWs, as Japan rejected International Red Cross recommendations to do so.

Documented Voyages — Ships with Known Data

Ship	Route / Departure Point	Date(s)	POWs Aboard	POW Deaths	Final Disposition
Montevideo Maru	Rabaul → Philippines / Pacific route	Departed ~Jun 1942; Sunk 1 Jul 1942	1,054 (Aus. POWs & civilians)	1,054 No survivors	Sunk by USS Sturgeon (SS-187). First and deadliest single loss of Australian lives in the war.
Lisbon Maru	Hong Kong → Japan	Oct 1942; Sunk 2 Oct 1942	~1,816 British POWs	~842	Sunk by USS Grouper (SS-214). Japanese locked hatch covers; survivors attempting to swim were shot.
Shinyu Maru	Philippines/Borneo area	25 Oct 1942	~500 POWs	~100 drowned	Damaged by Dutch submarine HNLMS O 23; ship abandoned. Some prisoners drowned escaping.
Singapore Maru	Batavia (Java) → Singapore → Moji, Japan	Dep. 17 Oct 1942; Arr. 25 Nov 1942	~3,000 British POWs	108 en route	Completed voyage. Arrived Moji, Kyushu. One of the largest single POW shipments of the war.
Nichimei Maru	Dutch East Indies area	Sunk 15 Jan 1943	965 Dutch POWs (+1,500 Jpn troops)	32 POWs	Sunk by U.S. aircraft. Relatively low POW death toll compared to other incidents.
Buyo Maru (Bunyo/Byuo Maru)	Burma / Bay of Bengal route	26 Jan 1943	Primarily Indian POWs (2nd Bn, 16th Punjab Regt)	Heavy; survivors machine-gunned	Torpedoed by USS Wahoo (SS-238). Survivors in the water were strafed — USS Wahoo crew misidentified them as Japanese troops.
Chuyo (Escort carrier)	Pacific transfer voyage	Sunk 4 Dec 1943	21 POWs (USN, ex-USS Sculpin)	20 of 21	Sunk by USS Sailfish (SS-192). Grim irony: Sailfish had previously been rescued by Sculpin's crew.

Ship	Route / Departure Point	Date(s)	POWs Aboard	POW Deaths	Final Disposition
Suez Maru	Dutch East Indies	Sunk 29 Nov 1943	~550 British, Dutch, Irish, NZ POWs	550 — ALL killed	Sunk by USS Bonefish (SS-223). Survivors struggling in the water were deliberately massacred by Japanese riflemen and machineguns on the escort minesweeper. Subject of war crimes investigation.
Ikoma Maru	Southeast Asia	Sunk 21 Jan 1944	611 Indian POWs	418	Sunk by USS Seahorse (SS-304). 193 survivors.
Tamahoko Maru	East China Sea → Japan	Sunk 25 Jun 1944	772 Australian, British, American, Dutch POWs	560	Sunk by USS Tang (SS-306). 212 survivors.
Harugiku Maru (ex-Van Waerwijck)	Strait of Malacca area	Sunk 26 Jun 1944	720 POWs +55 Jpn troops	180 POWs 27 troops	Sunk by HMS Truculent. 540 POWs survived and were recovered.
Yoshida Maru No. 1	Philippines area	Sunk 18 Jan 1944	Significant number (exact records lost)	Significant	Sunk by USS Flasher. Detailed records not fully preserved.
Koshu Maru	Southeast Asia → Japan	Sunk 4 Aug 1944	1,513 (mostly Javanese laborers)	1,239	Sunk by USS Ray (SS-271). One of the highest single-ship labor/POW death tolls.
Shinyo Maru (SS)	Mindanao, Philippines → Japan	Sunk 7 Sep 1944	750 American POWs	668 (only 82 survived)	Sunk by USS Paddle. Japanese guards shot prisoners attempting to escape the sinking ship and those in the water. U.S. had intercepted messages but believed it was a troop transport.
Junyo Maru	Padang, Sumatra → Belawan	Sunk 18 Sep 1944	~1,626 Allied POWs +~4,200 romusha (~5,800 total)	~5,620 total (~1,300+ POWs)	Torpedoed by HMS Tradewind. Sank in approx. 20 minutes. One of the largest single maritime disasters in history. Most victims were Indonesian forced laborers (romusha).
Rakuyo Maru	Singapore → Japan (via Luzon Strait)	Dep. ~6 Sep 1944; Sunk 12 Sep 1944	1,317 Australian & British POWs	1,159	Sunk by USS Sealion II (SS-315). 63 survivors rescued four days later by the very U.S. submarines that had sunk the ship.
Kachidoki Maru	Singapore → Japan (same convoy as Rakuyo)	Sunk 12 Sep 1944	~900 British POWs	~400	Sunk by USS Pampanito (SS-383). ~500 survivors transferred to Kibitsu Maru and taken to Japan. Pampanito returned to rescue survivors.

Ship	Route / Departure Point	Date(s)	POWs Aboard	POW Deaths	Final Disposition
Hofuku Maru	Southeast Asia → Japan	Sunk 21 Sep 1944	1,289 British & Dutch POWs	1,047	Sunk by American aircraft. Only 242 survived.
Arisan Maru	Manila, Philippines → Japan	Sunk 24 Oct 1944	1,782 U.S. POWs	1,773 (only ~9 survived)	Sunk by USS Shark (SS-314) or USS Snook (SS-279) — attribution disputed. Hatches reportedly sealed by guards before ship sank. Among the deadliest single losses of American lives at sea.
Oryoku Maru	Manila, Philippines → (en route to Japan)	Dep. 13 Dec 1944; Sunk 15 Dec 1944	1,620 (1,556 American, +British, Dutch, Czech, Norwegian)	~270 aboard; many more subsequently	Bombed and sunk by U.S. Navy aircraft from USS Hornet at Olongapo/Subic Bay. Survivors held in open tennis court; 15 wounded prisoners later executed by decapitation. Survivors continued ordeal on Enoura Maru and Brazil Maru.
Enoura Maru	Takao (Kaohsiung), Taiwan (Oryoku Maru survivors)	Survivors transferred 6 Jan 1945; Bombed 9 Jan 1945	~1,000 (Oryoku survivors)	~350–400	Bombed by Allied aircraft while in Takao harbor on Jan. 9, 1945. Disabled and abandoned. Survivors again transferred — this time to Brazil Maru.
Brazil Maru	Takao, Taiwan → Moji, Japan (final leg of Oryoku ordeal)	Arrived Moji 29 Jan 1945	549 alive at docking (Oryoku/Enoura survivors)	73 died within 1 month; only 372 survived the war	Completed voyage to Moji. Japanese medics were shocked at the prisoners' condition. 110 worst cases sent to military hospital at Kokura; four groups sent to Fukuoka POW camps 1, 3, 4, and 17.
Asaka Maru	Singapore (Keppel Harbour) → Japan	Dep. 4 Jul 1944; Wrecked ~Aug 1944	British POWs (number unrecorded)	Unknown	Wrecked in storm between Luzon and Formosa. Survivors rescued by Japanese destroyers and transferred to Hakusan Maru, arriving Moji 28 Aug 1944.
Maros Maru	Ambon → Makassar → Surabaya	Dep. 17 Sep 1944; Arr. 26 Nov 1944	~650 British & Dutch POWs	159 during 40-day repair stop at Makassar	Completed voyage. Survivors transported by train to Batavia (Kampong Makassar camp). Deaths resulted from appalling conditions during mandatory engine repairs, not enemy action.

The Oryoku Maru – Enoura Maru – Brazil Maru Sequence

These three ships represent a single continuous ordeal lasting from 13 December 1944 to 29 January 1945. Of the 1,620 men who boarded Oryoku Maru in Manila, only 372 survived the war. At each stage — sinking, open-air detention, another bombing, then the final freezing voyage to Moji — the prisoner count dropped. The 15 wounded men selected at Olongapo for supposed transfer to Bilibid Prison were instead taken to a cemetery and executed by decapitation or bayonet. Japanese Lt. Junsaburo Toshino, who ordered those executions, was hanged at Sugamo Prison on 18 August 1948.

Named Ships — Minimal Documented Voyage Data

The following vessels appear on the official compiled list of Japanese hell ships but lack fully documented routes, dates, or prisoner counts in surviving historical records. Many transported POWs successfully without incident; others are known primarily by name from survivor accounts or Japanese shipping records. This list is acknowledged as incomplete by all authorities on the subject.

Aikoku Maru	Aki Maru	Akikase	Akitzuki
Amagi Maru	Anami Maru	Aramis (aka Teia Maru)	Argentina Maru
Awa Maru	Benjo Maru	Burong	Celebes Maru
Chichibu Maru	Cho Saki Maru	Chuka Maru	Clyde Maru
Coral Maru	Dai Moji Maru	Dai Nichi Maru	Daikeku Maru
Dainichi Maru	England Maru	Enoshima Maru	Enuri Maru
Erie Maru	France Maru	Fuji Maru	Fukkai Maru
Fuku Maru	Fukuji Maru	Fukuju Maru	Hakuroku Maru
Hakushika Maru	Haru Maru	Haruyasa Maru	Hawaii Maru
Heiyo Maru	Hioki Maru	Hiyoki Maru	Hokko Maru
Hokusen Maru	Hozan Maru	Ikuta Maru	Imabari Maru (ex-De Klerk)
Kaishun Maru	Kaiun Maru	Kakko Maru	Kalgan Maru
Kenkon Maru	Kenwa Maru	Kenzan Maru	Kiaota Maru
Kibitzu Maru	Kohho Maru	Kokusei Maru	Konosue Maru
Koryu Maru	Kunishima Maru	Kurimata Maru	Kyokko Maru
Kyokusei Maru	Lima Maru	Maebashi Maru	Makassar Maru
Maru Go (5)	Maru Hachi (8)	Maru Ichi (1)	Maru Ni (2)
Maru No. 760	Maru Roku	Maru San (3)	Maru Shi (4)
Maru Shichi (7)	Mati Mati Maru	Matsu Maru	Maya Maru
Mayebassi Maru	Melbourne Maru	Mishima Maru	Miyo Maru
Moji Maru	Nagara Maru	Nagata Maru	Nagato Maru
Nanshin Maru	Naruto Maru	Natoru Maru	Nishi Maru
Nissyo Maru	Nitikoku Maru	Nitimei Maru	Nitta Maru
No. 6 Kotobuki Maru	No. 7 Hoshi Maru	No. 17 Nanshin Maru	Noto Maru
Oite	Pacific Maru	Panama Maru	Raihei Maru
Rashin Maru	Rendsberg	Rio de Janeiro Maru	Roko Maru
Rokyo Maru	Ryukyu Maru	Samurusan Maru	San Diego Maru

Sanko Maru	Seikyo Maru	Sekiho Maru (ex-Canadian Inventor)	Shinsei Maru
Shoun Maru	Sibijac	Singoto Maru	Soong Cheong
Subuk	Sugi Maru	Suzuya Maru	Tachibana Maru
Taga Maru	Taian Maru	Taiko Maru	Taikoku Maru
Taka Maru	Tango Maru	Tateishi Maru	Teiryu Maru
Tenno Maru	Toyama Maru	Yamagata Maru	Yashu Maru
Yomi Maru	Yoshida Maru No. 2		

Research Notes & Sources

Primary Reference: Gregory F. Michno, *Death on the Hellships: Prisoners at Sea in the Pacific War* (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 2001). ISBN 1-55750-482-2. Documents all 156 voyages with primary-source citations.

National Archives: RG 38 (Records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations) holds the primary American documentation, including intensive post-war accounting efforts for the Oryoku Maru, Enoura Maru, and Brazil Maru voyages. Casualty figures were compiled against Top Secret ULTRA intercepts and required name-by-name verification for next-of-kin notification.

POW Research Network Japan (powresearch.jp): Cross-references Michno's data with Japanese shipping and naval records; includes photographs of many vessels.

Casualty figure caution: Figures in this document are drawn from the best available secondary sources but should be treated as estimates. Japanese records were deliberately destroyed, never kept, or remain classified. Figures for POWs aboard vs. killed are disputed even for the best-documented sinkings. Michno's study is the scholarly standard, but even he notes irreconcilable discrepancies between Japanese-submitted figures and Allied records for several ships.

Additional references: Kelly E. Crager, *Hell Under the Rising Sun* (Texas A&M, 2008); James W. Parkinson & Lee Benson, *Soldier Slaves* (Naval Institute Press, 2006); National Archives Prologue article by Lee A. Gladwin, Winter 2003, Vol. 35, No. 4.